

Interview with: Larry Fiandt

Interview by: Richard Killblane

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Killblane: Could you tell me how you got in the Army, became a truck driver, and got to Vietnam?

Fiandt: I got my draft notice and decided I'd rather pick something to do, so I went and enlisted. I enlisted for a truck driver, took my basic at Fort Knox and advanced training at Fort Ord, became a truck driver.

Killblane: Why a truck driver?

Fiandt: I always liked to drive, I always have drove something. That's about it.

Killblane: How did you end up in Vietnam?

Fiandt: I just got orders to go. I didn't volunteer for Vietnam. At that time that's where about everybody was going.

Killblane: When did you arrive over there?

Fiandt: Early January I believe it was.

Killblane: 1970?

Fiandt: 1970. In Long Bien and was placed in Cha Rang Valley.

Killblane: At this time in the war, the media has turned against the war. As you're going in there what are your personal feelings about the Vietnam conflict?

Fiandt: I didn't really pay too much attention. I didn't listen to too much radio or read too many papers or anything.

Killblane: What company were you assigned when you got there?

Fiandt: My orders read 545th, but I was in a Detachment 1 placed with the 523rd in Cha Rang Valley.

Killblane: At that time or did that come later?

Fiandt: At that time, I was never actually with the 545th, I had always spent my time with the 523rd.

Killblane: What kind of truck were you assigned to?

Fiandt: 5 ton.

Killblane: That company was 5 ton cargo?

Fiandt: Yes, sir.

Killblane: Tell me about what your job was while you were there.

Fiandt: When I first go there everybody does two weeks guard duty, they get acclimated to what's going on around them. Then I was placed with the night drivers, we'd shuttle back and forth to Qui Nhon to the ammo dump loading trucks at night for the day drivers. I did that for

about a week and a half, two weeks, then I was offered a job to drive the Matchbox, a 5 ton gun truck.

Killblane: Describe the Matchbox, what kind of truck was it, what kind of armament?

Fiandt: It's a typical square box. Outside armor was like everything else, the inside armor was PSP, it was Pierced Steel Planking, it wasn't the typical inside armor like the rest of them. The Matchbox was built, probably started in January 70, and as I got on it, it was just being completed. I helped put the ammo and the guns on it. We did probably a week and a half or two weeks of convoy before we had a name on it.

Killblane: How did you come up with the name Matchbox?

Fiandt: I'm not really sure. It was somebody on the crew. We were all trying to think of one and somebody did.

Killblane: What does it refer to, do you know?

Fiandt: I can't really say, but I believe the reasoning was that if anything got inside, it would go up like a box of matches.

Killblane: How did you get picked to be on a gun truck?

Fiandt: I have no idea. The individual that came and asked me had been the driver of it, although it had never been on convoy, and he was made the NCOIC of the truck when somebody else had left. The truck was brand new, it hadn't ever been convoyed yet.

Killblane: When did you get picked for that? do you remember how long you had been there?

Fiandt: It must have been early February. That's just what I did for a long time.

Killblane: You were a driver the whole time?

Fiandt: No. I don't really know how long it was, it was months, then I got a severe sun poisoning. I got off the truck and went to night drivers again, but I was gun truck crew for night drivers.

Killblane: They needed gun trucks in the compound?

Fiandt: No. Night drivers went from Cha Rang to the ammo dump and to Qui Nhon to load the trucks for the day drivers. They had a gun truck run with them. We usually used any truck that was in the compound that was available. We weren't assigned a gun truck. So, I got the opportunity to part-time crew several different trucks. I never did go back to Matchbox.

Killblane: How long did you drive for Matchbox, again?

Fiandt: Maybe four, five months

Killblane: That's quite awhile. Tell me about the missions. What's your normal routine on a gun truck from the morning getting ready to go out?

Fiandt: Typical maintenance, you check things out.

Killblane: You get up at what time?

Fiandt: I can't even remember.

Killblane: The key thing is are you getting plenty of sleep?

Fiandt: Yeah, I didn't seem to be hurting for sleep or rest, I don't remember that being part of my troubles. We just checked the truck out, make sure it was ready, oil, water, make sure the tires were okay. Then we generally went down to the firing range and tested the weapons.

Killblane: What kind of weapons did you have on the Matchbox?

Fiandt: In the beginning we had an M60 on each corner in the front and a single 50 center, rear. Later it was changed. It didn't have the 60s very long. We ended up with three 50s. Of course, then we had an M79 up front and we had our M16s and there were other things, 45. Of course there was the frags and everything that went along with it. Then after we test-fired the weapons we went to the Ponderosa and was ready to convoy.

Killblane: What's Ponderosa?

Fiandt: The Ponderosa was a big staging area across the street from Camp Addison. It had a big PX there and two great, big fuel tanks. Normally the gun trucks backed up to where the fuel tanks were. The convoys were staged in rows down the Ponderosa.

Killblane: Do you have a normal place in the convoy when you roll out, or did it change each time you went out?

Fiandt: It varied. Normally Matchbox was in the center of the convoy.

Killblane: Any idea why?

Fiandt: No. No reason why, but it seems like we used to run about 15 trucks for every gun truck. Convoys were usually about 30 trucks. Matchbox was generally in the middle. We did a

lot of convoys with Uncle Meat. Uncle Meat seems to be on the rear quite often. That's probably the gun truck I remember running with most.

Killblane: What's your normal runs that you made?

Fiandt: Normally Matchbox went to An Khe or Pleiku.

Killblane: Just that Highway 19?

Fiandt: Yeah. I remember we did a few to Chu Lai and a few to Tuy Hoa. There were a few fire bases I can't remember their names. I remember a lot of fire base names but I can't remember which ones we went to. We took the 4th into Cambodia. We did Ple mei, Ple Jer'Rang I think it was, then there were some other places up there that were terrible places, I can't remember the names.

Killblane: So, when you get off of Route 19, that's because what? With the 4th it's going in to Cambodia, what were the other reasons?

Fiandt: Just wherever we were going.

Killblane: What was it like being a driver on a gun truck?

Fiandt: I was just a real sense of accomplishment. It was something special. You had a special piece of equipment, and a sense of pride. You felt good, you felt good on what the gun trucks were and what they stood for, and what they accomplished. And, you knew that everybody liked your presence. Everybody liked to see them gun trucks.

Killblane: How did you know that?

Fiandt: Just because everybody was glad to see you, everybody treated you good.

Killblane: There was an elitism with the gun trucks, why so? The team bonding that went on in the gun trucks, were they hand-picking the people for their crews or eliminating people that weren't working out? How did that work out?

Fiandt: Everybody that I seemed to know had been hand-picked, as to why, I don't know.

Killblane: Who was doing the picking?

Fiandt: Seems like the NCOIC on the truck was picking. There was an individual picked for Matchbox one time that was a friend of the NCOIC, but as to why I was picked, I have no clue. The individual that picked me, I didn't know, and I hadn't been there very long. It just felt good to be on a gun truck. You knew you were feared by people who should fear you for one. You knew you were liked by people that should like you, I guess.

Killblane: What are the duties that are different about driving a gun truck versus driving some of the other trucks?

Fiandt: Not much really. It seemed like the gun truck drivers took a little better care of their trucks. You weren't concerned with getting to your off load site, you weren't concerned with getting a back load. And, you knew, also that if you had any trouble with your truck or needed anything, you would get it. It seemed like we pretty much got what we needed for the truck.

Killblane: What kind of problems did you guys encounter along the way on your convoys?

Fiandt: There were break downs, but I don't really remember having to deal with them much. For a long time, when we first started, a wrecker ran with us. Then as more of the gun trucks were converted to carrying tires and stuff, the wrecker didn't run with us anymore. We'd help the drivers change tires, give them tires to change. I don't remember towing vehicles and things like some other trucks have done. In the ambushes, we went back and cleared the road of trucks, then wreckers were brought in to take them away.

Killblane: Is Highway 19 black-topped by this time?

Fiandt: Most of it's black-topped. There were portions that weren't.

Killblane: Where was that, do you remember?

Fiandt: There were some places between Cha Rang Valley and the bottom of An Khe Pass that weren't black-topped. I believe there was a few stretches between the top of An Khe Pass and An Khe that wasn't paved. And the same on the other side of An Khe there were short stretches between Mang Yang pass and Pleiku that weren't black-topped. Mang Yang pass was black-topped.

Killblane: What about the bridges, were the bridges out?

Fiandt: There were a few bridges out, and there were, I remember, a few pontoon bridges, floating bridges type things. I remember a few shoe flies where you went down around where the bridge had been, where they were I can't really say. I don't really remember a lot of names of places. I just kind of went there and come back...

Killblane: But they haven't repaired all the bridges at this time, that's what I was looking for?

Fiandt: No. There were still bridges down. Toward Tuy Hoa there was a rail bridge that we used. The vehicle bridge was not operable, and we used a big long rail bridge going across it.

Killblane: It had been converted for wheels, right?

Fiandt: Right. It seems like, they would let traffic come one way for awhile, then they would let traffic go the other way for awhile. I don't know about running trains, I don't know if they did that anymore on there or not.

Killblane: How many ambushes were you involved in?

Fiandt: About three.

Killblane: With the Matchbox.

Fiandt: Three ambushes with the Matchbox, then there was sniper fire.

Killblane: Could you describe what took place in the ambushes and what you guys did?

Fiandt: There was an ambush April 1 that a convoy ahead of us on An Khe Pass, just short of the hairpin was hit. A gun truck had caught and RPG right in the hood and was disabled. We went up to assist them and in the process our trucks in our convoy that were ahead of us were turning around and coming down the Pass. A lot of them had 105 howitzers on wheels, and when they were turning them around they were backing them into the side of the mountain and a lot of them were upside down. So, it was hard dodging the trucks and bouncing 105s and getting up into the ambush. But, we got up there and we'd give the other gun truck some ammo, actually at first we asked them if they wanted to leave their truck. They didn't want to leave their truck so

we gave them some ammo and proceeded on up around the hairpin. There were some mortars and small arms. We found a driver that was hurt and needed to get out of there. There were probably four, five, maybe six cargo trucks that were disabled, but the only one driver that was injured was left in them. We got him and got him medivaced out at the top of the Pass then went down and cleaned up the ambush, trucks you know, things were over then. Ace of Spades was there, he came up with some reactionary forces walking in behind him. That was about it.

Killblane: That was one, what about the other two?

Fiandt: The other ones were just ambushes with nobody hurt, and a lot of return fire. Actually, there was a round come in Matchbox and went into the 50 cans on the floor and the NCOIC, last name was Buchanan, caught a portion of that round in his arm. I remember, I was up front and as I bent over to pick some M79 rounds I heard a whistle. I asked one of the old timers later if you could hear a round go by. He said, yeah, you could, but it had to be close, and I always figured that whistle was that round, because when I heard that whistle I stood back up, I thought somebody was trying to get my attention to, you know, move ahead or move back to a better range of fire or whatever. I figure it must have been that round because when I looked back in the truck Buchanan was holding his arm, he had been hit. Then the other one was just a lot of heavy sniper fire I'd guess you'd call it. I don't know if you'd call it an ambush.

Killblane: Harassment fire.

Fiandt: Right. We returned fire and the convoy scattered in all the same direction, the road wasn't blocked or anything.

Killblane: During these ambushes you want to keep trucks going, now the first one you said you would turn trucks around?

Fiandt: They were just turning around.

Killblane: Why?

Fiandt: Because they didn't want to enter the kill zone for one, and they didn't know at the time that the road was close to being blocked up there.

Killblane: What happened, they took out the vehicles that had been disabled, blocked the road?

Fiandt: The road wasn't entirely blocked. You could get around them, but if the ambush was bad enough and you hadn't entered the kill zone, you usually turned around and went the other way if you could. Their convoy had scattered. The rear portion of their convoy had turned around and come back down the Pass with ours. What got through the kill zone, the front portion of their convoy had gone on to An Khe.

Killblane: How do you turn a tractor trailer around on An Khe?

Fiandt: These were 5 ton cargos.

Killblane: Oh, 5 ton cargos? Okay, you can do that, that road was wide enough for that, right?

Fiandt: Yeah, but now there was a lot of, like I said, 105 howitzers behind a lot of our trucks. They back them right into the hillside, and that's why the 105s turned over. You just do whatever you can. One guy jumped out of his truck and took off. Then went back and got his truck, people did a lot of strange things.

Killblane: What's the stress level like being on a gun truck from the time you arrive in Vietnam to the time you leave your truck?

Fiandt: I didn't think about stress. There was probably more of a sense of pride being on something like that. Even at that time that there was stress. The only stress I remember is right after an ambush. When you see an ambush taking place you're busy and you don't think about it, then after it's over you shake and you're scared, and you think about what happened and what could have happened. Then when you get back to base camp or around your friends, then there's the sense of pride again and accomplishment of what you've done. It's just a mixed bag of feelings. Stress seems like one of the new words to classify stuff that was always a normal way of feeling anyway.

Killblane: I guess I'm trying to understand the emotional experience you go through.

Fiandt: There's probably a number of emotions and feelings. Like I said, When there's that much going on, I don't know if I really thought about being shot at or anything, there was things to do. As a driver I would look for muzzle flashes. I had been told that you can out-drive an RPG. So I was always looking for these RPGs. I'd never seen one fired at me. I was always looking for something to duck, because you can see them coming at you from what I was told. I was always looking for the muzzle flashes for the best place to put the truck. Then you had to check the trucks that were damaged for people in them. There was just a lot to do in an ambush. You had to be careful of the guys in the back, you didn't want to knock them down or throw them around, so you had to drive as smooth as you could and accomplish the other things.

Killblane: During an ambush you have to drive in there, is it the NCOIC telling you to go or you just instinctively know that you've got to get up there? How does this crew work together?

Fiandt: In the April 1st ambush, I seen the ambush, I seen the gun truck that was hit, I could see the smoke off the guns up there. It was in a spot and then disappeared from view, you couldn't see it again. I think, I'd seen it at about the same time the NCOIC did. So, there was no telling to go into it or anything, you knew that's what you were going to do, that's what you were there for.

Killblane: That's part of your training as a driver of a gun truck? That's what makes you different?

Fiandt: I wouldn't say you were trained as a gun truck driver, I wasn't really trained at driving a gun truck, but you knew what your job was.

Killblane: You finish with the Matchbox and go back to night driving, then what?

Fiandt: We just escorted the night drivers to get those trucks loaded. You know, there may have been some stress level there, because nights were bad.

Killblane: I didn't know that. I thought you were just driving in the compound fairly safe.

Fiandt: No. We ran miles on the road. We went to the ammo dump. The ammo dump was on the other side of Phu Tai. It was probably eight, ten miles or so. Then there was a place we called VC Village you had to go through. It was not uncommon to see sniper fire and you'd see the green tracers but you don't know how many rounds are between them really. You didn't normally return fire, you just got out of the area. These convoys running at night, little convoys,

it'd be like eight, ten, twelve trucks and one gun truck behind it. They run fast. They ran wide-open everywhere you went. There were some terrible ambushes on those night drivers.

Killblane: You mean while you were there?

Fiandt: There was one particular one while I was there, I wasn't involved in, April 25, Black Widow was destroyed, John Maddox was killed, Mason Raglan was killed. Gun jeep was destroyed, that's what Mason Raglan was in. There was a guy we called Whitie, he was thrown out of the gun truck into the weeds and not picked up. He lay there after everything had left, and watched the VC and everything come in and look for him and scavenge what they could or whatever. I was on Malfunction at that time, no I was on Matchbox at that time. I was still on Matchbox when that happened, then I went night driver after that. After night driving I had the opportunity to get Wild Thing which was a $\frac{3}{4}$ ton gun truck, then I changed the name of that to Malfunction.

Killblane: Was that for day driving or night driving?

Fiandt: That was day. After the gun jeep was destroyed April 25th I don't really remember gun jeeps being involved at night anymore. I wasn't around them but I don't really remember gun jeeps or any 3/4s at night. It was normally a single gun truck. Malfunction and I did day time convoys.

Killblane: How long did you do the night driving before you went to the $\frac{3}{4}$ ton gun truck?

Fiandt: It wasn't long. I'm really bad with time.

Killblane: Just general, like a couple of weeks or a month?

Fiandt: Maybe a month and a half.

Killblane: Yeah, that's what I'm looking for.

Fiandt: Then I got the $\frac{3}{4}$ ton. I hauled the convoy commander.

Killblane: Lead or rear?

Fiandt: Everywhere.

Killblane: Oh, he ran up and down?

Fiandt: Up and down the convoy, different places, keep the trucks in line, proper speed, that kind of thing.

Killblane: What's the crew for that, how many?

Fiandt: Just myself driving and the convoy commander in the back.

Killblane: How many guns?

Fiandt: An M60 on each side. For ammo, I had mini cans, I think the mini cans held 1,000, maybe 1,200 rounds.

Killblane: What's a mini can?

Fiandt: They were just a big can of ammo, I was always told they were mini cans, and I always believed they were what they took the 30 caliber ammo out of to put in the feeder boxes for the mini guns. I had one box hung on each side that fed that M60 for that side. Then I had a couple

of other boxes for spare ammo, armor on the floor. Just the spare tire for the vehicle was carried and that was it.

Killblane: How many ambushes were you involved in while you were on the Malfunction?

Fiandt: No ambushes.

Killblane: No ambushes?

Fiandt: No ambushes, no sniper fire. Most of my convoys were Chu Lai or Tuy Hoa. No problems.

Killblane: And, you're still in the same company during this time frame, too?

Fiandt: Yes.

Killblane: Did you do that till you finished your tour?

Fiandt: Yeah. I never took an R&R and I stayed right on Malfunction until I had five days left, which they said was what I had to have to get out of country.

Killblane: What do you mean?

Fiandt: Well, to do my paperwork, my processing, that kind of thing. You needed about five days. And, left.

Killblane: At that time did you have an auction, like your last month in-country that you could shift to a base-side job and didn't have to drive?

Fiandt: It seems like your last twenty days you could do something else. I imagine it was guard, I don't know. I just, it wasn't an option for me, I just wanted to stay on my truck.

Killblane: Why?

Fiandt: Well, it was my truck.

Killblane: Did you build it or inherit it from someone?

Fiandt: I inherited it. When I got the truck it was named Wild Thing. There were some mechanical problems with it but nothing major. Then, I changed the name to Malfunction.

Killblane: Why?

Fiandt: I just didn't like the name Wild Thing.

Killblane: Buy, why Malfunction?

Fiandt: Malfunction was a friend of mine's car back in the States, it was kind of a street racer, fast, nice car. Actually, before he left he told me I could have the name, not with any gun truck in mind or anything, but he said if I was to ever build a little street racer or hot rod or anything that I could have the name. I just remembered it and that's what I chose. But, it fit the truck because there was some mechanical problems.

Killblane: How come you didn't take your R&R?

Fiandt: I don't know. These trucks felt like yours and you just didn't want to give your stuff to anybody else. When I got sick there, in the beginning I thought I would be going back to

Matchbox, but after awhile I knew they had another guy driving it, and they had been trained to go in the back as a gunner, and I didn't want to be a gunner, I wanted to drive. So, I just looked for other options. That's why when this ¾ ton come up I took that.

Killblane: Did you get the short timer's attitude? When I say short timer, did you begin to worry about that last month before you went home?

Fiandt: No. Not that I remember. I remember thinking about being short and that I was looking forward to going home.

Killblane: But, you weren't taking any other precautions, being more cautious that you were before?

Fiandt: No.

Killblane: When do you get orders to go home?

Fiandt: I believe I left December 10th. I always kind of wished I hadn't after that.

Killblane: Why's that?

Fiandt: I just felt like I'd left people behind that I shouldn't have left. Even now it feels like something I shouldn't have done. I know, now where they went and what happened, but, at the time it was just like I had left all my friends behind.

Killblane: So, you're leaving before they leave, rather than the friends you made are pulling out before you do?

Fiandt: It was both, some of my friends had left before and some left after, I'm sure. It was just, I enjoyed my spot, as well as you can enjoy in that type of situation, the gun trucks. We didn't really associate with too many gun trucks outside 523rd. In fact it was always kind of like a rivalry between other companies and your company. Just in pride. I just felt like I shouldn't have left, like I should have stayed. I couldn't have got out any earlier by staying because I had a year and a half yet to go. Then, after I got to Fort Hood, I really wished that I had stayed.

Killblane: Why's that?

Fiandt: Fort Hood was miserable.

Killblane: You're in a ¾ ton gun truck. How did the other gun truck crews see you? Did they see you as an equal or is the ¾ a little bit less than...

Fiandt: I don't think they see me as an equal. I think I was considered a brother, and the ¾ ton wasn't equal to a 5 ton, not in strength, fire power, mobility or anything. They did their job good. And, it was my truck, I didn't have to worry about if it was okay to go here or there because of the other crew members. I could go, there was a lot of freedom with a ¾ ton gun truck, and also with a jeep, I imagine. I could test drive it whenever I wanted to, I could go test the weapons, clean them, I could fire them whenever I wanted to. It was a whole lot more freedom to a ¾ ton gun truck.

Killblane: Is there anything else you can think of. That's pretty much the questions I had?

Fiandt: No, that about covers it for what I can think of now. If I had everything to do all over again, I'd do the gun truck thing the same. That's where I'd be. That's it.

Killblane: Thanks a lot.